

A Sending Spirit

Acts 2:1-21

June 5, 2022

This is it! The promise has been fulfilled. Before Jesus ascended to Heaven, he promised the gift of this Holy Spirit, and this is it—today is the day! Pentecost, fifty days after Passover, nine o'clock in the morning, to be exact.

It's a rich story full of color and detail. Can you imagine? Jesus' followers all together in one place, gathered for the Jewish festival of Pentecost, gathered in community and in prayer and in worship, a special day, perhaps, but in some respects a day like any other...

And then: "a sound like the rush of a violent wind."

Overtaking the senses, the Spirit fills the space, ears taking in a cacophony of sound, eyes trying to make sense of something like tongues of fire, and in and through it all, the unmistakable, awe-inspiring presence of God. And they were filled, all of them, with the Holy Spirit, the gift of the enduring presence and power of God, promised by Jesus. It is the same Spirit that has been present for all time, hovering over the waters at creation, giving God's inspired breath of life to all that lives and moves and breathes.

Jesus promised that *this* Spirit would be given to his followers, giving them power to be witnesses to the ends of the earth, and assuring them that they would never be alone. Given the sheer magnitude of this event, some have wondered: Why isn't this a bigger deal for us?

At Christmas, we celebrate the incarnation, God taking on flesh to come and be with us in the form of a tiny, vulnerable infant named Jesus. There are presents, and there are family gatherings and special meals as together we celebrate and adore the newborn king.

At Easter, we celebrate Christ's resurrection, God's power to overcome sin, evil, and even death. There are Easter egg hunts and family photos and the possibilities of newness and hope all around as we celebrate the empty tomb.

And then fifty days later, we have Pentecost, the gift of the Holy Spirit, the formation of a people—the church—given power to go and to be witnesses, to be Christ's body in the world. I certainly hope that we're doing it justice today, but the truth is that poor Pentecost gets very little of the fanfare of Christmas or Easter. Some have suggested that it's a timing thing. It's fifty days after Easter—late May, early June—end of the school year, Memorial Day, Indy 500, the start of summer rhythms.

But I think that it's more than just timing. The uncomfortable truth is that Pentecost asks something of us. Christmas is about adoration; Easter is about celebration. But Pentecost? Pentecost is about going somewhere. Doing something. Being Christ's witnesses out in the world, carried and *sent* by the Holy Spirit.

Could it be that we are reluctant to go?

Could it be that the faith that we proclaim on Sundays has become so separate from other parts of our lives that we're not even sure what it would look like to be sent to live as witnesses, as Spirit-filled disciples, the other six days of the week?

Could it be that, despite the clear gift and call of the Spirit, we doubt our own ability to be witnesses?

One of God's gifts to my family in this most recent chapter of the pandemic was the Disney movie *Encanto*. The story centers around Mirabel, a

remarkably normal, unexceptional young woman surrounded by a family endowed with magical powers, or gifts. Mirabel's mother can heal people with food. Her sisters command the attention of the whole town. Luisa, with her superhuman strength, and Isabella, with her ability to manipulate nature, bringing the beauty of flowers everywhere she goes. Mirabel has an aunt who can control the weather and an uncle who sees visions of the future—but we won't talk about him. And then there's Mirabel's cousins: one who can shape-shift, another with superhuman hearing, and another who can talk to animals.

The family uses their gifts to help and serve their community, healing, building, helping to sustain the town and all of its people. They are adored and celebrated for it. And in this flurry of gifts and beauty and wonder, there's Mirabel. She has no gift—she couldn't forget it if she tried. She loves her family, and she wants to care for them and for her community. But in many cases, she often gets in the way, despite her best intentions. Her abuela and others give her the sense that it would be better if she just stayed on the sidelines, leaving the work to those who were really equipped to do it.

Could this be part of our reluctance to embrace and celebrate Pentecost? To be *sent* as Christ's witnesses to do God's work in the world?

Sure, maybe it's the timing. Maybe it's our human tendency toward inertia. After all, it's pretty comfortable being here in this sacred space or worshiping via livestream from the comfort of the couch.

But perhaps it is deeper, a fundamental disbelief in ourselves, our worthiness, in having anything to contribute or offer. If that's the story that we believe, consciously or subconsciously—if that's the story that we have told ourselves or have been told by others—it's no wonder that we're reluctant to embrace Pentecost.

The adoration of Christmas, the celebration of Easter? Yes!

The coming of the Spirit, the birth of the church, the imperative to be sent into the world as witnesses for Christ? *Yikes!*

There is good news for those of us who have felt unqualified for this task. You heard it already in our reading from Acts when the Holy Spirit descended in a mighty and transformative way. The effect was immediate. All those who were gathered could suddenly speak other languages, telling of God's deeds of power so that all people from all different nations living in Jerusalem could hear and understand. "What does this mean?" onlookers wondered. "Have these Jesus people been overindulging in the communion wine this morning?"

Peter raises his voice, offering an emboldening word to those gathered and to us. Quoting the prophet Joel, Peter speaks words from God:

I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams.
Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
and they shall prophesy.

Listen again: I will pour out my spirit upon *all* flesh. Young and old. Women and men. The oppressed and downtrodden. I will pour out my spirit upon *all* flesh.

It was just over a year ago, May 14, to be exact, thanks to my Instagram stories. A sunny spring day spent working in the yard. My then 3-year-old Prose mysteriously disappeared for a while (never a good sign), and just as I was about to abandon the pile of mulch that was in front of me, Prose re-appeared in the distance, walking across our front yard toward me. She looked serious and purposeful, and she was holding something in her hand, very carefully, so as not to spill it.

Prose...what are you doing?

Undeterred, she continues on her path, which I realize is not to me, but to her then-18-month-old brother,

who was on the opposite side of me. “I’m bringing this to my brother to remember Jesus,” she said.

I could finally see what “this” was: a stray communion kit that she had found in her mother, the pastor’s car. You know the kind that we survived on for a while, small and sterile little pre-packaged cups with a bit of juice and a wafer sealed inside the top of the lid, not all that easy to open, a bit sad and inadequate, and yet somehow by God’s grace always enough. Prose found one, and she knew what to do. She opened it, and she prepared to go and share it.

“I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh.”

All. Young and old. Women and men.

Friends, with the gift of God’s Spirit, there is no such thing as too young, too old, too busy, too stuck, too sick, too much, or too little. There is no such thing as not gifted or talented enough. “I will pour out my Spirit upon *all* flesh,” God declares.

I have seen it in a 3 year old and an 18 month old. I have seen it in the saints of our church, some who at 80 and 90 and even at life’s end and in dying teach me more about what it means to be a witness and to live faithfully than I could hope to learn anywhere else. “I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,” God declares.

Our friend Mirabel’s story puts it plainly. An utterly unremarkable young woman in a family endowed with magical gifts, she has nothing that the others would call a “gift,” and yet it is her determination, her love, and her willingness to allow others to be who they are that are ultimately healing and redemptive for her family and for her community. They’re not supernatural gifts. They’re not flashy or impressive. They’re just Mirabel, and it turns out that Mirabel, in all of her ordinariness, is more than enough.

The work of living as Spirit-sent witnesses is like this; it’s so much more ordinary than we lead ourselves to believe. It doesn’t take superhuman strength or insight or intelligence or good looks. I love what Rev. Chris Henry had to say about this last Sunday, reminding us that the work of witnessing takes

place in prayer, in acts of compassion, in the ways that we interact with and treat each other in the ordinary places where we live and eat and work—on soccer fields, in classrooms, homes and hospitals, conversations over cups of coffee, in preparing a meal for another, in living with kindness, offering a listening ear, standing up for voices unheard. *This* is what it means to be sent by the Spirit to live as a witness. This is how the church of Jesus Christ does its ordinary and extraordinary work of tending and healing and sharing the good news of God’s love and forgiveness in Jesus Christ.

And so, on this day of Pentecost and going into this season of summer, what does it look like for you to be sent? Where are you being sent? What are the places and the rhythms that will fill your days? What does it look like for you to be a witness in all of those different settings? Perhaps at work or on vacation? On the long-awaited trip? During the unexpected detour? In the garden or at the dinner table?

Whether you travel near or far from this faith community, what might it look like to stay connected here? To find ways to sustain relationships? To be devoted together to the practice of prayer?

How might you be a witness for the good news of God’s kingdom despite the story or stories you have told yourself or others have told about you?

We can’t deny it—Pentecost asks something of us. But we need not be reluctant, for today we celebrate that we, the church, are sent with God’s power, not ours. No matter our age or our gender, no matter our circumstance or our ability, we are sent into our everyday lives to be witnesses, to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ. We have the gift of the Spirit, and it is more than enough. We are more than enough. And sent by the Spirit, we have work to do.

To God be the glory. Amen.